

Courtside: Survivor Clashes with Milosevic

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By Emir Suljagic in The Hague (TU 309, 14-18 April 2003)

Hidden behind a screen, and known only as B-1701, the witness gave several hours of harrowing testimony about how he was twice about to be executed, yet survived.

He told how Serbian forces came into Glogova, a village of 750 houses just outside of Bratunac, and executed some 72 villagers in May 1992.

But when Milosevic attempted to cross-examine B-1701, the witness initially refused to answer his questions.

"I will not have any talk with you," B-1701 said, visibly upset by the prospect of being questioned by the man he considered responsible for the killing. "You will be answering my questions."

Judge Richard May, attempted to calm the witness by assuring him that Milosevic would not be allowed to do anything to hurt him. "We know this is difficult for you," Judge May said.

The witness eventually agreed, though not without voicing his dissatisfaction with the process. "I'm trembling," B-1701 said. "You've got me all upset. You're asking questions that shouldn't be asked."

The testimony was part of the prosecution's effort to prove that Milosevic was responsible for the atrocities committed in Bosnia.

B-1701 said the troops that came into Glogova in May 1992 were wearing Yugoslav army, JNA, uniforms. The Bosnian Serb army was not officially formed until May 12, and federal forces were under Milosevic's command, claim prosecutors.

During an often-tearful testimony, B-1701 said that he had visited Bratunac in mid-April 1992 and saw large numbers of JNA troops, tanks and armoured vehicles.

On May 8, the Yugoslav troops, along with a few Serbian policemen, came to Glogova and confiscated several rifles from the villagers, including B-1701's hunting rifle. A prominent Serb resident of the town, Miroslav Deronjic, assured the villagers that nothing would happen to them and gave them receipts for the rifles.

B-1701 said he was not afraid at the time. He had known Deronjic since he was a child - the man was a friend of his father's - and B-1701 saw no reason not to trust him.

The next day, however, his village was awakened by an explosion, followed by small-arms fire. Soldiers in face-masks began going from house to house. They rounded up villagers and set their houses on fire. B-1701 tried to escape by running into the forest, but was caught by a group of soldiers.

He said the soldiers took him to their commander, who beat him. Close by, soldiers were rounding up a group of people by the river for execution.

Three of them - B-1701's friend Medo Delic, and his neighbours, Seco and Zlatija - were old and crippled and could not move quickly. Serb soldiers shot them on the spot.

Deronjic watched the entire event.

Another of the men who was shot dead, Jusuf, appealed to Deronjic for help. "Neighbour, you won't kill me. I have two small children. You know I am an invalid," B-1701 recalled Jusuf saying.

Next, B-1701 was taken to the river with a group of men. The group was divided into two. He was in the first group of eight.

A female Serb soldier moved from man to man, pointing her gun at them. She called out the name of the man standing next to B-1701, and asked him where he wanted to be shot.

But before the man could reply, she fired three bullets into his face. Next, she pointed her gun at the witness. Before firing, she turned to take a sip of plum brandy.

In the time it took her to drink from the bottle, another Serb soldier shouted at B-1701 to come and help move bodies. It saved him from execution.

As he began the grisly task, the second group of 25 men was rounded up for execution and B-1701 was ordered to join the line-up.

The soldiers fired on them all, sending them plunging into the river.

But again, luck came to his rescue. The bullets that struck the others missed him. B-1701 fell into the river and faked death for several hours by floating with the corpses. Only his nose protruded from the water.

When the soldiers left, he got out of the water and saw that there were no other survivors. He looked for his sons - he did not say how many he had, or how old - amid the corpses piled up on the riverbank. Unable to find them, he fled into the woods.

Several days later, he saw a truck arrive to collect the bodies. None of the bodies have ever been found.

Deronjic's part in the massacre was well rewarded by the Bosnian Serbs. Pleased with his work, his commanders made sure he rose through the ranks of Radovan Karadzic's Serbian Democratic Party.

But he was later indicted by The Hague court - and now, charged with crimes against humanity, he shares the same prison as Milosevic.

During the cross-examination, Milosevic attempted to discredit B-1701's testimony, claiming that those killed were not innocents.

Milosevic asked whether the Muslim-led Party of Democratic Action, SDA, had built a Muslim army to fight the Serbs. He suggested that one of the men B-1701 saw killed by the firing squad was in fact responsible for atrocities against Serbs.

Judge May interrupted Milosevic's questions to give a lecture in the conduct of cross-examination. "You aren't saying there is some political justification for the crimes?" asked the judge.

Next, Milosevic tried to question the witness about written statements he gave to the Bosnian police and the tribunal, but B-1701 grew confused and said he could not remember giving any statement. The defendant eventually stopped his questioning. "There is no point in me questioning this witness. He apparently remembers nothing," he said.

Some observers disagreed - saying that B-1701's problem is that he remembers too much.

Emir Suljagic is an IWPR reporter.

Location: Bosnia and Herzegovina

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